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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000813

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SUBJECT: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

REF: BAKU 802

Classified By: Political-Economic Counselor Robert Garverick, Reasons 1
.4 b and d.

11. (C) SUMMARY: Azerbaijan's municipal elections will be held on December 23 this year. The Central Election Commission (CEC) is working hard to prepare all necessary regulations for the election, although choosing this late date looks suspiciously like the GOAJ is trying to avoid international attention. CEC official Rovzat Gasimov stated the CEC is working hard to develop a cadre of professional election workers, and has fired the officials whom Embassy observers saw committing fraud in previous elections. Opposition parties have said they will run in these elections, but not as a bloc due to internal disagreements. Overall, however, interest in these elections is low and the elections are unlikely to produce any outpouring of interest in grassroots democracy, as many in the international community had hoped. END SUMMARY.

Municipal Elections on December 23

12. (C) On October 7 the Central Election Commission (CEC) announced that the municipal elections would be held on December 23. In accordance with the election code, the 28 day campaign period in advance of the election would begin on November 25. This late date came as a surprise to both Azerbaijanis and the international community in Baku, as the elections are usually held on December 15 and the CEC had given no previous indication that they would be delayed. Speculation has run rampant that the date was chosen to minimize the number of international observers present, given the holiday season. In an October 13 meeting with poloff, head of the CEC's international relations office Rovzat Gasimov could give no reason for the delay, and shifted blame for the decision to the commissioners from the ruling party. (NOTE: The CEC is led by 13 commissioners, only one of whom is from an opposition party. END NOTE).

GOAJ Election Preparations

13. (C) Over the past year the parliament of Azerbaijan has slowly reduced the number of municipal councils by consolidating many of the smaller ones. For this year's election, there will be 1,718 municipal councils, with 15,682 seats open for election. Gasimov stated this large number of seats, and an even larger number of candidates will be difficult for the election commissions to manage. He also

stated that since local and international interest in these elections is low, as compared to last year's presidential election and the March referendum, he is finding it hard to motivate the election officials to do their jobs. Still, the CEC has adopted all of the necessary regulations for the election and candidate registration has started. A voter list update is also underway.

14. (C) Gasimov also noted confidentially that 90 percent of the precinct election commissioners in precincts where U.S. Embassy observers noted problems during the presidential election and subsequent referendum have been fired from their positions. The other 10 percent will be fired in the next few weeks. Gasimov stated the CEC had no direct authority to fire these people, but he was able to arrange for the Constituency Election Commissions (ConECs) to ask for these people to resign. In particular, the Sumgayit area had been particularly problematic, and the ConEC chairman himself was replaced after refusing to admit he had a problem in his district. Gasimov said that these officials needed to be strong personalities in order to stand up to pressure. In order to develop a sense of professionalism, the CEC brought all 125 ConEC chairmen to Baku for 2 weeks of training in September. Gasimov arranged high level speakers for the group in order to introduce a sense of pride in their work.

Opposition Parties Will Run(But Not Together

15. (C) Opposition parties have also begun preparations for

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the municipal elections. The six major opposition parties, which formed the movement "For Karabakh and the Republic" in response to the referendum, initially announced they would run as a bloc for the municipal elections. The parties have now announced, however, that they cannot do so, due to cumbersome candidate registration requirements in the election code (reftel). In meetings on September 14 and October 7 with poloff, however, Igbal Agazade, chairman of the Umid Party, explained that the real reason for not running as a bloc was that the parties could not agree on how many candidates each party would nominate. Agazade claims the Musavat Party wanted to name the most candidates, despite not being able to organize several thousand people to run. Agazade said his party was ready to run 4,000 candidates, and showed poloff the well-organized documentation for his candidates. Agazade claimed that Musavat asked Umid to withdraw its representative on the CEC (the only opposition member) as a condition of forming a bloc. Agazade said he would do so if he and the five Musavat members of parliament also resigned. Musavat would not agree to this condition, and so the bloc was not formed. The parties have agreed not to actively campaign against each other.

Comment

16. (C) Public interest in these municipal elections is low. Municipal councils have little actual power, other than selling public lands. This, in turn, acts largely as a vehicle for corruption, leading to public distrust of these officials. There was some discussion in parliament of passing a new law to give municipal councils more power, but this now seems unlikely to happen this year. Many local political commentators and international actors had hoped these municipal elections would spur some interest in grassroots democracy, and be a valuable test for next year's parliamentary elections. So far there is little to back up these hopes. Still, the fact that the opposition will participate in the elections is a positive step and will hopefully help the parties to re-learn some basic campaign skills after years of boycotts.

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